TITLE: For a Board of Definitions

AUTHOR: George Berkeley

VOLUME: 9 ISSUE: Summer YEAR: 1965

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

Proposed approach to pinning down some free-floating terms often used in intelligence.

FOR A BOARD OF DEFINITIONS

George Berkeley

If a nuclear physicist were to write that "A few whatchamacallits created a new thingamajig when they bounced off a slew of whoosies," we might suggest that his terminology needed honing. Yet day in and day out we let reporters of political events (me included) get away with talking about "democracy," "nationalism," "insurgency," "dictatorship," "totalitarianism," "the right," "the left," "the slightly left of center," "probability," "possibility," and many other concepts that lack any universally accepted definitions.

Why?

My guess is that it's because the poets don't care—they like to keep words nice and loose—and the mathematicians [1] haven't united to do something about it. This article is one mathematician's brief for doing something. Unless those of us concerned with the flow of information up through the pipeline to the policy makers understand clearly what our terms mean we will continue to waste time straightening each other out or, worse, let ourselves in for some serious misunderstandings.

Some Kind of Measles

As an example of a word that is open to all sorts of interpretations, let's look at a real dandy—"nationalist." On one day in early 1964, I read two accounts of a crisis in Brazil's state petroleum agency, Petrobras. The first was a newspaper editorial. It said, "The nationalists in Petrobras denounce the Communists and vice versa." Among those that the newspaper called "nationalists" was the Petrobras president. The other account was an intelligence report. It quoted a Communist leader as saying that the Petrobras president was trying "to demoralize the nationalists and the Communists." The context made it clear that the Communist leader considered the two groups to be allied with one another, with the president their mutual enemy.

[1] For this usage of "poets" and "mathematicians" see Sherman Kent, "Words of Estimative Probability," *Studies* VIII 4, pp. 49-64.

I once threw out to an English class in Brazil the question, "What is a nationalist?" The answers that came back ranged all the way from "a patriot" to "a Communist." (And the fellow who said "patriot" was no Communist, if you're wondering.)

What kind of word is this that means so many things to so many people? It's only one member of the whole class of compound abstractions that this article is concerned with. As a matter of fact, there's no dearth of definitions for these words. Every scholar in the behavioral sciences setting out to write a book apparently feels obliged to come up with a new set of definitions uniquely his. For "nationalism" our literature is rich in definitions. Some samples:

> "Nationalism: loyalty and devotion to a nation; esp: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups."
>
> —Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary

> "Nationalism is the preference for the competitive interest of a nation and its members over those of all outsiders in a world of social mobility and economic competition, dominated by the values of wealth, power, and prestige, so that the goals of personal security and group identification appear bound up with the group's attainment of these values."
>
> —Karl W. Deutsch in *Nationalism and Social Communication*

> "It is a state of mind in which we give our paramount political loyalty to one fraction of the human race—to the particular tribe of which we happen to be tribesmen. In so far as we are captured by this ideology, we hold that the highest political good for us is our own nation's sovereign independence; that our nation has a moral right to exercise its sovereignty according to what it believes to be its own national interests, whatever consequences this may entail for the foreign majority of the human race; and that our duty, as citizens of our country, is to support our country, right or wrong."
>
> —Arnold J. Toynbee in *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 3 November 1963

> "Nationalism, a product of political, economic, social, and intellectual factors at a certain stage in history, is a condition of mind, feeling, or sentiment of a group of people living in a well-defined geographical area, speaking a common language, possessing a literature in which the aspirations of the nation have been expressed, attached to common traditions and common customs, venerating its own heroes, and, in some cases, having a common religion."
>
> —Louis L. Snyder in *The Meaning of Nationalism*

> ". . . the measles of mankind."
>
> —Albert Einstein (quoted in a letter to *Time*, issue of 12 March 1965)

The differences among these range from fine intellectual distinctions to the moral connotations strongly felt by Toynbee, whom you can almost see shaking his head in dismay, and Einstein, who minces no words at all.

Some scholars feel a need for breaking down the concept into more than one category. Hans Kohn distinguishes between (1) nationalism in the Western world and (2) nationalism outside the Western world. Snyder has suggested a chronological classification using these labels: integrative nationalism (1815-1871), disruptive nationalism (1871-1890), aggressive nationalism (1900-1945), contemporary nationalism (since 1945). Other writers have used many modifiers to show the variety of forms that nationalism can take: "humanitarian," "Jacobin," "traditional," "liberal," "integral," "medieval," "monarchical," "revolutionary," "totalitarian," "cultural."

The label is thus subject to more interpretations than the elephant was to the seven blind men. But "nationalism" is unequivocally clear in comparison with those warped old standards "right" and "left." At your next party, try a parlor game. Have each guest write his definition of these political labels. Promise a prize to any two of them that agree. But don't bother to have a real prize on hand; you won't need it.

So much for the problem.

The Recommendation

Now is the time, in my opinion, to set up a board to define abstract concepts relevant to the intelligence business. Because the need for precise verbal standards reaches its apogee in the intelligence community, the initiative in organizing such a board should be taken by that community. The coordinating role, the job of running the semantic clearing-house, should rest with an official group.

This group should by no means work behind high walls. On the contrary, it should be in close touch with the unofficial intelligence community, and by this I mean university faculties, book publishers, newspaper editors, and other private citizens who contribute to the flow of information that is intelligence in its broadest sense. At the outset of the program and perhaps periodically thereafter the board might invite members of this unofficial intelligence community to participate.

Let's say that the board has been organized and that a hundred or so private entities have also agreed to take part. Here is one possible modus operandi: The board chooses an abstract concept like

one of those in the first paragraph. A researcher compiles a selection of definitions already in use in some part of the world. The board might meet to concoct one or more new definitions. The board then sends to all participants, official and unofficial, a copy of these definitions of the term under consideration.

At this point the board relaxes for a spell. It gives the participants a good, long stretch to mull the matter over and submit comments and recommendations. Six months or more would be quite reasonable for this phase. This is one program that is uncrash. The ball is now with the participating entities (*parents*, to coin an acronym). Their task is to recommend a single definition which employs a minimum of abstractions and relies as much as possible on *quantifiable* criteria.

What we're asking of the parents is their help in substituting concrete or otherwise measurable elements for abstract terms like the "competitive interest," "social mobility," and "values" in Deutsch's definition above. Too wild a dream, you say? Not at all. One school of behavioral scientists has been gaining ground on the quantification problem for at least twenty years.[2]

My job does not place me in contact with them, so I can't draw any current examples of their work from first-hand knowledge. But let's suppose that one of them has been studying the correlations between the ethnic breakdowns of entire populations and the ethnic breakdowns of their national legislative bodies. He might propose that one of the criteria for defining "democracy" should be just this correlation. If it's better than a certain figure, the government under study meets one of the criteria for a democracy. Another measurable phenomenon relevant to this definition: the number of political parties that ran candidates in the last national election.

Getting back to the modus operandi, after the six-month incubation period the board considers all entries, chooses the best—very likely a composite of several—and publishes the results for distribution to members of the intelligence community and to the parents. The finished product is apt to be long. It may run to the length of a National Intelligence Estimate or a long magazine article. Excessive?

[2] And at least two kindred spirits have made a beginning within our immediate community. Both the Kent article cited earlier and "The Definition of Some Estimative Expressions," by David L. Wark in the same issue of the *Studies*, sought to establish a consensus on the arithmetic implications of such words as "possible" and "probable."

Probably not; abstractions are like that. When a dozen French mathematicians started out to make a definitive study of their subject they found they needed 200 pages to deal with the ins and outs of the number "one" alone.

Side Benefits

Two by-products of all this activity are worth noting. First, with so much talent focussed on abstract concepts, one by one, we are surely going to discover newer and better ways of dividing up and classifying some of them. We may invent a new term now and then for a newly isolated concept. Through the board and the parents we will have an unprecedented test market for tentative terminology.

Second, if well organized and managed, the board's activities will win the respect of influential entities outside the intelligence community. It will be performing a public service. In its modest way it should earn some favorable press comment, and this, I submit, is something that the community could use.

Our Greek forebears believed that the universe consisted of only four elements—fire, water, air, and earth. Today we know of ten varieties, or isotopes, of a single element called tin. A lot of people along the way have done a lot of classifying—and quantifying. Somebody had to, of course. Our rising level of sophistication in the physical sciences is both a cause and a result of their work. In tackling behavioral science problems in similar fashion we will be making use of a lesson already learned by the operations researchers: "Some of the intangibles that one generation treats by experience are converted to measurable factors by the next generation." [3]

But to avoid the charge that I consider all abstract words completely reducible to quantifiable terms, let me hastily second the rest of the above quotation: "This process is a never-ending one because reality is too complex to be completely circumscribed by a finite set of measurements."

---

[3] David W. Miller & Martin K. Starr, *Executive Decisions and Operations Research* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1960).